VI

DEATH AND REBIRTH

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1. Difference between Rebirth and Reincarnation

All religions believe in an after-life. However the Buddhist doctrine of rebirth should be differentiated from the transmigration and reincarnation of other systems, because Buddhism denies the existence of a transmigrating permanent soul, created by a God or emanating from a *Paramatma* (Supreme or Universal Soul).

Buddhism does not believe in any sort of transmigration. There is nothing that comes out of one body and enters another. Events take place according to the Law of Dependent Origination or *Paticca Samuppada.* Everything comes into existence depending on an instance previous to it and everything must also give rise to an instance, depending on itself.

In the *Paticca Samuppada*, the Buddha mentioned that **Craving** gives rise to **Clinging,** that to **Becoming** (or the continuity of the life-process actuated by ***Kamma***) and that to **Birth**. The Craving of the dying man must give rise to Clinging, that to the continuity of the life-process of Becoming through *Kamma* (*Kammabhava*), and that to Birth. This is in line with the Second Noble Truth whereby craving gives rise to a new being consisting of the five aggregates of clinging which are suffering.

2. How Rebirth Takes Place

Starting with the conception of a human, the Buddha said that a germ of life is planted only when **three conditions** are met. Mother and father must unite, it is the mother's period (ovum is ripe) and "**the being to be born** " is present. For a being to be born here, a being with craving for Becoming must die somewhere. It should not be taken to mean that "a being to be born or soul is waiting for the egg and sperm to unite and then enter it." Parents only provide us with the **cellular material** in the rebirth process. This does not mean that all beings require parents for their birth because there are beings that are **reborn spontaneously,** depending on their *Kamma.*

Death according to Buddhism is the cessation of the psycho-physical life of any one individual existence. It takes place by the passing away of the life faculty (*jivitindriya*), heat and consciousness. Death is not the complete annihilation of a being, for though that life-span ended, the force that hitherto actuated it is not destroyed.

The instant death occurs, a new mental process called the Rebirth Consciousness (*patisandhi citta*) conditioned by the **Reproductive *Kamma*** (or *kamma-bhava*, the *kamma* process of becoming) arises together with three *kamma*-produced material groups constituting the **body, sex and base** (seat of consciousness). They condition the arising of mental & material processes of the embryo, now called a being in the conventional sense. The Rebirth Consciousness and the 3 *kamma*-produced material groups are collectively termed **"the being to be born."** This term is used only in this particular connection, and must not be mistaken for a permanent soul waiting to enter a suitable womb to be reborn.

3. The Re-linking or Rebirth Consciousness

According to the Buddha's teaching of Dependent Origination, "Through the Process of Becoming (*kamma-bhava*), conditioned is Rebirth." To understand this relationship, we need to realize that in reality, there is no such thing called a being, only mental & material processes called *nama-rupa*. Even during one's lifetime, these *nama-rupas* arise and pass away continuously.

Death is the extinction of the **last consciousness** on dissolution of the old *nama-rupa*. Rebirth is the **immediate arising** of a new consciousness called the rebirth or re-linking consciousness, together with the new *nama-rupa*. It is called **re-linking** consciousness because it joins the new existence with the old one. The arising, of the rebirth consciousness is conditioned by the last ***kamma*** before death. If this *kamma* is wholesome, rebirth will take place in a happy existence. If unwholesome, rebirth will take place in an unhappy existence. This is what the Buddha meant when He said that '**all beings are born of their *Kamma (Kammayoni)***'.

It is very important to realize that:

(a) There is no soul or permanent entity that leaves the old body and enters another new body. Lack of this understanding usually leads to the belief in the transmigration of souls or reincarnation, namely: the **wrong view of eternity.**

(b) As Volitional Activities or *Kamma* depend on Ignorance and Craving, beings that have not completely eradicated these defilements will still accumulate *Kamma* and undergo rebirth after death. Lack of this understanding usually leads to the **wrong belief in annihilation** after death, which is held by modern materialists.

4. Modes of Death

Death can occur due to the following **four causes**.

(a) Exhaustion of the force of the **Reproductive *Kamma*** that gave rise to the birth in question.
(b) Expiration of the **lifespan**.
(c) Simultaneous exhaustion of **both** Reproductive *Kamma* and expiration of lifespan.
(d) Action of a **stronger *Kamma*** that suddenly cuts off the power of the Reproductive *Kamma* before expiry of the life-term.

The first three types of death are called **Timely Death** while the last one is called **Untimely Death.** An oil lamp, for instance, may get extinguished owing to any one of the following 4 causes:

(i) The exhaustion of the wick,
(ii) The exhaustion of oil,
(iii) Simultaneous exhaustion of both wick and oil, and
(iv) Some extraneous cause like a gust of wind.

The death of a person may similarly be caused by the above-mentioned four ways.

5. Objects Presented to the Mind before Death

To the dying man is presented a ***Kamma, Kamma Nimitta*** or ***Gati Nimitta.*** By ***Kamma*** is meant some action of his, whether good or bad. The most powerful are **Weighty *Kamma***. If this is absent, he may recollect the action done immediately before death called **Death Proximate *Kamma*.** If this is also absent, a **Habitual *Kamma*** is presented to him, such as stealing in the case of a thief or healing the sick in the case of a good physician. Failing all these, some casual act, one of the cumulative reserves of the endless past or **Cumulative *Kamma*** becomes the object of the dying thought. Among the skillful actions lay Buddhists are taught to do at their last moments are the performance of the ten meritorious actions such as chanting the Three Refuges and Five Precepts mentally, recalling one's pilgrimage to the holy places to arouse faith, listening to the *Dhamma* (tape recording or monks chanting), recollections of the Virtues of the Buddha, *Dhamma* and *Sangha*, recollections of one's Virtues or Generosity, practicing mental culture such as Loving Kindness or the Four Foundations of Mindfulness (*Satipatthana*). Such wholesome actions will condition the arising of wholesome mental states to determine the last *Kamma* process before death and lead to rebirth in happy realms. As death can strike at any moment, one should be prepared to face this eventuality.

Kamma Nimitta is any sight, sound, smell, taste, touch or idea which was obtained at the time of commission of the *Kamma,* such as knives in the case of a butcher, patients in the case of a doctor, an object of worship such as the Buddha image or Bodhi tree in the case of a devotee, or happy memories of one's pilgrimage to India.

Gati Nimitta is some sign of the place where one is destined to be reborn, an event that invariably happens to dying persons. If these indications of future birth are bad, they could be turned into good by influencing the thoughts of the dying man, so that his good thoughts may now act as the Proximate *Kamma* and influence the type of Reproductive *Kamma* to condition his rebirth. These symbols of one's destiny may be hellish fires, mountainous regions, mother's womb, celestial mansions, etc.

6. Five Visions of a Dying Person

According to Venerable Dr. Rastrapal Mahathera, the five visions of a dying person may be **hellish fires** for those who are bound for rebirth in hell, **animals and forests** for those bound for rebirth as animals, **dark apparitions** for those bound for rebirth as ghosts, **deceased parents and relatives** for those bound for rebirth as humans and **celestial mansions and chariots** for those bound for rebirth in the celestial realms. Chinese folk-lore, too, abound with stories about dying people who claim to hear the sound of chains or see visions of King Yama's guards with hideous faces resembling horses or bulls coming with chains to take them to the underworld for judgment. *Gati-nimitta*, being always a physical sight, is presented to the mind-door as a dream. Psychologically these mental stages may be termed as **illusion, hallucination or delusion**. Therefore people whose minds are lucid and unconfused at their dying moments may not experience any death-bed vision at all.

Readers who wish to know more about death-bed visions of a dying man should read the booklet by Venerable Dr. Rastrapal Mahathera (Ref. No. 3) in which the author narrated his personal experience with a dying layman who underwent various death-bed visions and how the author helped to allay his fears, leading to a happy ending.

7. The Dying Consciousness

Taking for the object an action (*kamma*) or sign of action (*kamma nimitta*) or sign of destiny (*gati nimitta*), the dying consciousness runs its course even if the death is an instantaneous one. In *Abhidhamma*, a normal thought process runs for seventeen thought-moments (*citta*), in which the ***Javana* process** lasts for seven thought-moments. This *Javana* stage is the most important from an ethical standpoint. It is at this psychological stage that good or evil is actually done i.e. *kamma* is performed. Commentators say that within the brief duration of a flash of lightning, there may be

billions of *cittas* or thought-moments. In the thought process before death, the *Javana* process is weak and runs for only five thought-moments. This last *Javana*-process is very important as it determines the **reproductive *kamma*** of the next life. Next the registering consciousness which identifies the object may or may not follow. After this, occurs the death-consciousness (*cuticitta*), the last thought-moment to be experienced in the present life.

On death the last consciousness passes away conditioning the arising of a new consciousness called **Rebirth Consciousness *(Patisandhi)*** in a new body or form of birth. And that new consciousness, too, immediately passes away and subsequent consciousness arise one after another in a stream, like a flux, like the flow of a river. This renewed life-flux inherits all past experiences. This new being is **neither absolutely the same** as the past one owing to its different composition, **nor totally different**, being the identical stream of *Kammic* energy.

The transition of the flux is instantaneous. There is no room for an **intermediate state** or *antarabhava*. According to the ***Kathavatthu*** (Points of Controversy) certain sects such as Pubbaseliya and Sammatiya held that there is an interim stage where a being awaits re-conception for a week or longer. The counter argument is based on the **Buddha's dictum** that there are three states of becoming (*bhava*) only — the Sensual, the Form and the Formless Worlds. Hence Buddhists do not believe that the spirit of the deceased person takes lodgment in a certain intermediate state until it finds a suitable place or womb for its reincarnation. **Rebirth takes place immediately,** and there is no difference in time whether one is born in a heaven or in a state of misery, as an animal or as a human. What actually conditions rebirth is not the death consciousness (*cuticitta*) but the last *Javana* process described earlier. If it is wholesome, rebirth takes place in a happy realm; if unwholesome, rebirth takes place in a woeful state of existence. Understanding this and the fact that death can strike at any moment in one's life, one should always be **heedful** and practise as many skillful actions as possible to face this eventuality before it is too late.

8. Modes of Birth

There are four modes of birth, namely:

(a) **Egg-born** creatures such as birds, reptiles and fish.
(b) **Womb-born** creatures such as humans, mammals and some earth-bound deities.
(c) **Moisture-born** creatures such as certain insects that take moisture as material for their growth.
(d) Creatures having **spontaneous births.** They are generally invisible to the human eye. Conditioned by past *Kamma,* they appear suddenly, independently of parents. *Brahmas, devas, petas, asuras* and hell-beings belong to this class.

There are **nine material groups** that are produced by *Kamma,* namely: base or seat of consciousness, life principle, male sex, female sex and five sensitive material qualities of eye, ear, nose, tongue and body. They are **fully developed** in beings that are **born spontaneously**. As such, beings of spontaneous birth do not need parents to provide the material layer or cells for their birth.

9. Four Planes of Existence

The four planes of existence are:
a) Sensual plane of misery (***apaya*** or ***kamaduggati bhumi***)
b) Sensual plane of bliss (***kamasugati bhumi***)
c) Fine material or form plane (***rupa bhumi***)
d) Non-material or formless plane (***arupa bhumi***)

- The sensual plane of misery comprises **four states**, namely: *niraya* or hell, animal kingdom, *peta* or ghost world and the host of *asuras* or demons. Rebirth in any of these four woeful states is conditioned by **unwholesome reproductive *kamma*** that predominates at the moment of death.

- In all **seven sensual states of bliss** comprising the human world and the six heavenly realms, rebirth as a normal human being or *deva*, is conditioned by **superior wholesome reproductive *kamma.*** However, rebirth as a degraded human being who is blind, deaf, dumb, retarded or deformed by birth, or as an earth-bound degraded *asura* of the lower realm of Four Great Kings, is conditioned by **inferior wholesome reproductive *kamma.*** (Refer to Chapter XI, Types of Wholesome *Kamma*).

- In the form or ***rupa*** plane, rebirth in one of the **sixteen states of *Brahma* gods** that possess form is conditioned by the type of mental absorption of the form plane (***rupa jhana***) that one has attained to.

- In the formless or ***arupa*** plane, rebirth in one of the **four states of Formless *Brahma* gods** is conditioned by the type of mental absorption of the formless plane (a*rupa jhana*) that one has attained to.

- In total, the four planes comprise **thirty-one** states of existence, details of which are provided in the next chapter.

10. References

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4) Points of Controversy – A Translation of the Katha-Vatthu by Shwe Zan Aung and Mrs. Rhys Davids. Published by the Pali Texts Society, London, 1979.